



MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.

Meeting Date: May 27, 2020

Agenda Item: Wild River Conservation Easement (R1)

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 minutes

Background: FWP proposes to purchase a conservation easement on approximately 50 acres along the Kootenai River between the Yaak River confluence and Troy. The property is owned by The Vital Ground Foundation, which has been working to purchase this property and protect it from residential development. The project is in an area identified by grizzly bear scientists as the best linkage between the Purcell and Cabinet mountains in the Cabinet-Yaak recovery area. FWP conserved a large portion of this linkage in 2012 with the 28,000-acre Kootenai Valleys conservation easement. The property also provides habitat and a movement corridor for endangered white sturgeon and threatened Canada lynx and bull trout. Residential development of this property would increase human-wildlife conflicts and inhibit movement of wildlife, and this conservation easement project would preclude those issues. Purchase would be funded by a US Fish and Wildlife Service Recovery Land Acquisition Grant for \$396,000 with Vital Ground providing the remaining funds.

Vital Ground would continue to own and manage the land and FWP would hold a conservation easement to ensure the property is managed to benefit fish and wildlife habitat in perpetuity. Public access to the property will be allowed for fishing and bird-watching opportunities. The conservation easement would not require Vital Ground to provide hunting access on this property due to the property's small size and the proximity to Highway 2 and neighboring residences. Vital Ground developed a management plan with input from FWP to guide the day-to-day management of the property, as well as to inform long-term goals for improving the property's habitat quality.

Public Involvement Process & Results: FWP released an EA for public comment from January 29 to February 17. Legal notices were published in four local newspapers and the *Helena Independent Record*. The EA was posted on the FWP webpage. Notices were sent to all adjoining landowners. FWP received 26 public comments on the proposed conservation easement acquisition. All issues raised by those who commented are addressed in the decision document.

Alternatives and Analysis: Two alternatives were analyzed and considered in the EA:

- 1) Alternative A (No Action) - FWP would not purchase a conservation easement on the property. Some or all of the lots could be sold to fund other acquisitions by Vital Ground if they determined another area had a higher conservation value for grizzly bears. The public would not have guaranteed access to this property; and
- 2) Alternative B (Proposed Action) - FWP would acquire a conservation easement on approximately 50 acres of property owned by Vital Ground along the Kootenai River. Residential and commercial development of this property would be prevented in perpetuity. Limited public access would be secured under the terms of the conservation easement, though Vital Ground would not be required to allow hunting access on the property given its proximity to the highway and dwellings.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale: FWP recommends the commission approve FWP purchasing a conservation easement on the Wild River Conservation Easement Project to ensure conservation values and associated public benefits would be protected.

Proposed Motion: I move the commission approve FWP's purchase of the Wild River Conservation Easement.